



**SUMMER FARM WALKS 2019**

Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal

# BETTER FARM BEEF CHALLENGE

IRISH  
**FARMERS  
JOURNAL**

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AGRICULTURE AND FOOD DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY  
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**Wesley Browne**  
Leagh, Co Monaghan H18R921  
Farm walk date and time:  
4 July 2pm and 5pm

**Harry and Joseph Lalor**  
Ballacolla, Co Laois R32CX29  
Farm walk date and time:  
11 July 2pm and 5pm

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**Adam Woods**

Beef editor,  
Irish Farmers  
Journal

**O**n behalf of the stakeholders of the Teagasc/*Irish Farmers Journal* BETTER Farm beef challenge, I would like to welcome you to our two summer farm walks. We hope you will find these informative and practical and that you can take home some key messages to improve the profitability of your farm. While increasing output and subsequent gross margin has been a central theme to all farms in the programme, it is the manner in which this higher output is achieved that brings the greatest learnings. All of the programme farms have placed a huge emphasis on grass and growing and utilising as much of it as possible in a bid to reduce costs. These farm walks will look at strategies employed by the farmers in relation to grassland management. Achieving higher animal performance by improving the genetic merit of suckler herds through better breeding has also reaped dividends. Most importantly, I want to thank Wesley and Harry and Joseph and their families for opening up their farms. With the support of Martina Harrington, Tommy Cox and John Greaney, as well as their local Teagasc B&T advisers Conal Murnaghan and Peter Doolan, I have no doubt that these two farms will continue to grow and improve their businesses in the years ahead. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the continued support of the programme sponsors FBD, ABP, Dawn Meats and Kepak.



**Martina Harrington**

Teagasc/*Irish Farmers Journal* BETTER farm beef challenge manager, Teagasc

**O**n behalf of the Teagasc/*Irish Farmers Journal* BETTER Farm beef challenge management team, I would like to welcome you to the farms of Wesley Browne and Joseph and Harry Lalor. It has been a pleasure to work with both farms and I want to thank them and their families for their openness and willingness to work with us over the last two and a half years. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank their local Teagasc B&T advisers Conal Murnaghan and Peter Doolan for their contribution to the programme.

The BETTER Farm beef challenge has been designed specifically to demonstrate how the adoption of key technologies can benefit suckler farms both practically, in the day-to-day running of their farms, and financially. The strength of the programme is that these technologies, such as improved grassland management, soil fertility, breeding and herd health, are being adopted not only on research farms but on commercial family farms.

The purpose of these two farm walks is to demonstrate the positive effect of the changes made by Wesley Browne and Joseph and Harry Lalor to their respective farms. I hope you find the days useful and can identify at least one change that you can bring home to your own farm to benefit you. Thank you for your time, enjoy the walks and take the opportunity to ask questions.



## Wesley Browne



# Welcome to Monaghan

**O**n behalf of myself and my partner Lorna and daughter Elsa, I would like to welcome everyone here today to Leigh, Co Monaghan, to our family farm. I hope you have an enjoyable day and that you find the visit both informative and worthwhile.

Since joining the Teagasc/*Irish Farmers Journal* BETTER farm beef challenge programme in early 2017, the farm has undergone many changes.

These changes were all simple steps, but are all having a positive impact on

the performance of the farm.

The completion of the farm plan opened my eyes to the potential of the farm and the scope it had for improvement. It also gave me the determination to place more focus on the areas I needed to improve in order to get the farm to its potential.

The key areas I focused on improving were grassland management, soil fertility and stocking rate.

Over the past three years I have been continuously improving my grassland management and I now recognise that



having an adequate quantity of high-quality grass in front of stock at all times is key to maximising animal performance.

Along with managing the grass quality, I am continuously aiming to increase the volume of grass grown on the farm too. Fundamental to this is increasing my soil fertility to the required levels. My primary focus has been on improving soil pH, but also I have been constantly building the soil P and K levels on the farm.

My stocking rate is continuously on the rise. I hope to reach my target num-

bers next year and when I do, output should start to increase too.

Finally, I would like to thank both Teagasc and the *Irish Farmers Journal* for allowing us to participate in this programme and I would also like to thank the industry stakeholders for their continued support of the programme.

In particular, I would like to give special recognition to my local Teagasc B&T adviser Conal Murnaghan and Teagasc BETTER farm adviser Tommy Cox for their continued work and help over the last number of years.

Wesley Browne

# Opting to build from within

**W**esley Browne is Monaghan's representative in the Teagasc/*Irish Farmers Journal* BETTER farm beef challenge.

Wesley operates a suckler-to-bull-beef system in the townland of Leagh, located on the outskirts of Monaghan town.

The farm is fragmented, divided into four main blocks within a 10-mile radius of the yard. In total, it comprises 66ha; 58ha of permanent grassland, with the remaining 8ha of the most challenging land planted for forestry in spring 2016. The grassland can be described as

heavy, drumlin-type soil, which is typical of the area.

Wesley is currently running a herd of 92 spring-calving suckler cows. Males are slaughtered as under-16-month bulls.

Last



year, they averaged 392kg carcass and U=3-. Heifers not retained for breeding are sold as replacements either in-calf or as maidens or they are finished for beef.

From the outset, Wesley, along with his Teagasc B&T adviser Conal Murnaghan and the BETTER farm management team, agreed that the farm had the potential to grow and utilise more grass and in turn carry extra stock.

The fact he has been operating a closed herd policy for a long number of years, increasing cow numbers was Wesley's preferred method of increasing the stocking rate as opposed to buying in extra stock. As a result, cow numbers have increased steadily year on year from 78 when the programme commenced in 2017







**Table 1: Wesley Browne farm plan - 2017 to 2021**

Measure	Base year 2017	Target 2021
System	Suckler-to-beef	Suckler-to-beef
Stocking rate (LU/ha)	2.06	2.5
Land base (ha)	58.3	58.3
Gross output/ha (kg)	838	1060
Gross output/ha (€)	1807	2550
Variable costs (% of output)	57%	1275 50%
Gross margin €/ha	777	1275

to 92 cows in 2019 and to 100 in spring 2020.

The farm has made steady progress since the start of the programme, in line with the farm plan targets (Table 1). Gross output for 2019 was 888kg/ha.

Major improvements have already

been made to grazing infrastructure and soil fertility, but this will be an ongoing process over the coming years. As the extra stock start to filter through the system, Wesley will soon start to reap the financial benefit from his investment of time and money.

**Wesley Browne**

# Maintaining a strong passion for breeding

**W**esley has a strong passion for breeding and this is very much reflected in the impressive herd of cows that he has assembled.

His preferred cow type is a strong continental cow with genetic base of Simmental crossed with Limousin or Angus.

In the last two years, Salers bloodlines have also been introduced to promote hybrid vigour and increase cow functionality.

Wesley's cows have an average replacement index of €111 (five stars), which puts him inside the top 4% of herds in the country.

Looking deeper into the index value for the herd, these cows tick all the boxes. The average milk figure is +7.4kg (five-star), average carcass weight (weight for age) is +20kg (five-star) and daughter calving interval is negative at -0.26 days (two stars).

Stock bulls are used for breeding, with Simmental, Limousin and Salers the breeds of choice this year (Table 1).

## PERFORMANCE

Approximately one quarter of Wesley's herd calves in November and December and the balance calves in March, April and May. The idea behind this split calving is to spread the work load that comes with calving 100 cows.

When target numbers are reached, the plan is to calve 25 cows from 1 November to 15 December and the remaining 75 from 1 March to 30 April in two tight and defined calving periods.

**Fig 1: Calf performance 2017 V 2018**

<b>Males 2017</b>	<b>1.19kg/head/day</b>
<b>Females 2017</b>	<b>1.09kg/head/day</b>
<b>Males 2018</b>	<b>1.21kg/head/day</b>
<b>Females 2018</b>	<b>1.11kg/head/day</b>

With the significant costs associated with keeping a suckler cow, a high level of performance is required throughout the year to cover maintenance costs and to provide a viable return.

Producing a weaned calf per cow per year is a target that every suckler farmer should aspire to achieve. Underpinned by the remarkable attention to breeding, Table 2 details the herd's impressive calving performance figures for 2018.

While herd calving performance and getting live calves on the ground is one thing, the next step is to achieve good calf performance after birth.

A good weaning weight is key to the success of any suckler system, live selling or finishing beef. Last year, male 200-day weight was 287kg. A combination of good genetics, high dam milk yield and good grassland management from mid-summer onwards will determine how heavy your weanlings are.

Wesley's attention to all three of these components has resulted in strong weaning weight for the last couple of years, shown in Figure 1.





**Table 1: Stock bull information**

Bull name	Breed	Sire	Replacement index	Terminal index	Calving difficulty
Ballydreen Maclean	Limousin	Ampertaine Foreman	€111	€154	4.50%
Sligo Stefan	Salers	Beguine	€211	€113	1.60%
Fearmor Jupiter	Simmental	Curaheen Gunshot	€131	€108	5.10%

**Table 2: Calving performance v the national average 2018**

	Wesley Browne	National average
Calving interval (days)	361 days	396 days
Mortality at birth (%)	0%	1.20%
Mortality before 28 days (%)	1.10%	3.10%
Calves/cow/year	0.98	0.85
Heifers calved 22-26 months (%)	77%	23%
Spring six-week calving rate (%)	19%	54%

## Wesley Browne Managing what's measured in Monaghan

**G**razed grass is the cheapest source of feed in Irish livestock production systems and maximising the amount of quality grazed grass in the animals' diet over their life time will have a positive impact on the productivity and profitability of the farm.

The saying 'you can't monitor what you don't measure' is particularly true when relating to grassland.

Before you can comprehend managing a high stocking rate at grass, you need to get to grips with what is growing on the land in front of you. Wesley walks the farm weekly to measure grass growth and assess farm covers.

Measuring highlights whether there is a surplus or deficit of grass on the farm, as well as ensuring that the grass in front of stock is of sufficient quality.

Pre-grazing yields at 1,600kg to 1,800kg DM/ha (10cm to 11cm) are the target for all stock in order to maximise intake and subsequent weight gain.

Depending on grass availability and time of year, any covers greater than 1,800kg to 2,000kg DM/ha potentially need to be taken out for silage.

Last year, Wesley took out over 300 bales of silage from surplus paddocks. These high-quality bales were then used to feed weanlings over the winter, greatly reducing concentrate costs. Measuring should also be viewed as a tool to



identify lower-performing paddocks for reseeding. Since joining the programme, just shy of 20 acres of poor-performing swards were ploughed and reseeded.

### PROGRESSION WITH PADDOCKS

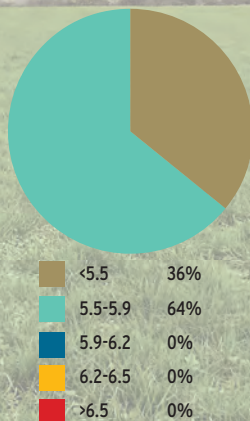
Following on from measuring, grazing management has also been tweaked to improve efficiency.

Set stocking has been replaced by rotational grazing, using both temporary and permanent fencing.

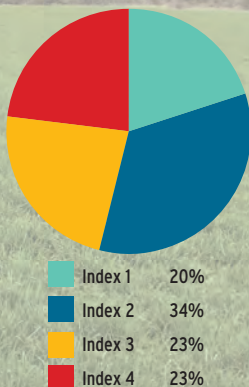
Stock residency in paddocks has reduced greatly, with stock residing in paddocks no longer than three days before the paddock is allowed to recover for 21 days ahead of the next grazing.

There are a minimum of seven paddocks for each grazing group and this allows for increased volumes of grass

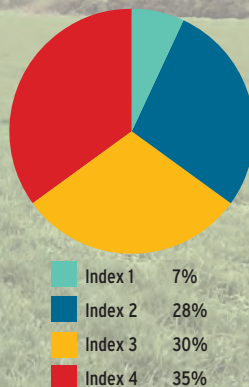
**Figure 1**  
Lime soil pH > 6.2



**Figure 2**  
Phosphorus (P)



**Figure 3**  
Potassium (K)



to be grown, better control of grass and improved animal performance.

### PRIORITISING THE PH

Approximately 90% of the soils sampled in Ireland are sub-optimal in one of the three major nutrients – pH (lime), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K).

Results from soil samples taken on the farm in early 2017 were very much in line with the national trend. One soil sample was taken per 4ha of the farm to determine the P, K and lime status and potential requirement of the farm.

As can be seen from Figures 1, 2 and 3, all three nutrients required attention, but pH was the biggest concern.

A soil pH of between 6.3 and 6.5 is ideal to allow for maximum nutrient uptake by roots of the grass. And recent studies

have shown that grassland soils maintained at pH 6.3 to 6.5 have the potential to release approximately 60kg to 80kg/ha more N than soils with a pH 5.0, thus representing a significant cost-saving opportunity on Irish farms.

Given its importance, no time was wasted in trying to rectify the pH situation and 60t of lime was spread in 2017. A further 160t was spread last year. Correcting the pH is the first requirement in optimising grass growth.

With P and K levels also in need of attention, Wesley has been targeting lower-index paddocks with cattle slurry, farm yard manure and compound fertilisers containing high levels of P and K(18:6:12 and 10:10:10), as opposed to using just straight N products, which was often done in the past.





## Everybody's responsibility

**T**he fatality rate in agriculture in Ireland is, unfortunately, far higher than any other economic sector. Worryingly, the level of farm accidents is not decreasing either. Similar accidents occur each year, with research showing that, in general, farmers' attitudes to safety will only change after serious injury occurs.

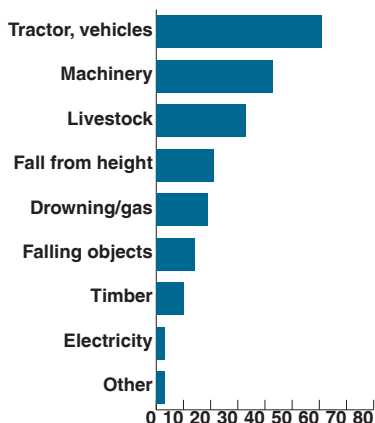
In the last 10 years (2009-2018), 207 people have died in agriculture and forestry-related accidents. The main causes of these deaths are seen in Figure 1. The most vulnerable to death and injury on Irish farms are both children and the older farmer (>65 years of age), accounting for almost half of the total number of fatalities.

### FARM SAFETY CHALLENGE

The farm safety challenge is a mandatory challenge, with all farmers required to complete a farm safety risk assessment on an annual basis and update this on a yearly basis, and to introduce two positive changes to their farms annually.

**Figure 1**

The main causes of farm accidents in the last 10 years



As part of the farm safety challenge, participants will also attend safety training days every year during the programme in areas such as livestock handling and machinery safety.